

Reframing academic literacy: Re-examining a short-course for “disadvantaged” tertiary students

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ABSTRACT: This paper revisits a successful short-course in academic literacy that was conducted for 50 “disadvantaged” students enrolled in the first year of an education degree at an Australian regional university (see Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004). Based on a sociocultural approach to learning and drawing on a conceptualisation of tertiary literacy as a social practice, the short-course disrupted deficit views of individual students and worked to help students expand their literate repertoires. However, recent discussions about learning have helped to problematise academic literacy and its place within an increasingly plural, multicultural, multilingual and textually multimodal society (Gee, 2003, 2004; Kalantzis & Cope, 2004; The New London Group, 1996). Rather than accepting academic literacy as the metaphoric opening of a “significant gate to economic success and sociopolitical power” (Gee, 2004, p. 91), recent views suggest that a homogenisation is at work and that courses in academic literacy serve to enculturate students into particular – and possibly outdated – social and literacy practices. Gee (2004), for example, argues that academic language represents a family of “old literacies” and that the take-up of language “once thought to be central to what counted as a ‘schooled’ and ‘intelligent’ person is now at best a necessary, but not sufficient condition for success in society” (p. 94). Drawing on Gee’s (2003, 2004, 2005) discussions of learning principles in multi-mediated contexts, and his preference for the notion of affinity spaces over communities of practice, this paper reframes academic literacy, then considers whether the short-course described above – which was judged as successful – has the potential to work with the increasing diversity of tertiary students’ learning and life experiences as well as to prepare them for successful participation in tertiary education contexts.

KEYWORDS: Academic literacy, tertiary literacy, literacies, situated learning, community of practice, affinity spaces, enculturation, new pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION

Our discussion of academic literacy in this paper focuses on the kinds of literacy that are valued by universities and are considered as having high status in our society. Writing is the dominant form of social action in the academy and plays a central role in constructing a particular identity. Judgements are made about students based on their academic writing, and those who do not exhibit mastery of this form of literacy are often considered less able than those who do. Much of the research on academic

literacy has been concerned with how to socialise students into “proper” academic practices without being critical of the practices themselves (Ivanic, 1998).

Furthermore, the traditional and generally implicit models of academic literacy are often considered benign and neutral. From this viewpoint, academic literacy is just a set of skills that students must master in order to perform successfully as “scholar”. In this way, academic literacy is viewed uncritically and its norms and conventions are considered unitary and monolithic. Such models do not take account of the conflicting, contested and plural nature of academic literacies. Neither do they take account of issues of identity and the institutional relationships and authority that are embedded within, and interact with, the diverse, student academic literacy practices that are accomplished in and across the university (Lea & Street, 1998).

Despite recent attempts to view academic literacy as situated practice and as socially constructed – and hence more open to contestation and change (Hirst et al., 2004; Ivanic, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998) – a broad survey of four Queensland university websites indicated that the dominant model of academic literacy still appears to be a skills-based approach (Hirst & Henderson, 2006). In these university websites, the term “academic literacy” is strongly associated with academic skills advisers, learning support, or some form of centralised learning centre. And in these contexts, academic literacy is defined as a generic set of skills (for example, grammar and editing) and types of writing (for example, essay writing, scientific reports and reference lists) that students need in order to be successful. Procedural guides lead students step by step in the construction of particular text-types. Additionally, academic support courses are often targeted at particular groups, such as “under-represented groups” and Indigenous students. As a result, academic literacy is generally constructed within discourses of deficit and remediation. Similar findings were reported by Green, Hammer and Stephens (2005) following their interviews with academics in one university. That is, the “problem” is seen as located within students rather than with teaching practices, and the “solution” to the problem focuses on student deficits that require remedial intervention from support staff.

REFRAMING ACADEMIC LITERACIES

The term “academic literacy” tends to hide any diversity that exists, thus restricting us to a singular view of literacy and a particular set of practices. When academic literacy is considered in the plural – as academic literacies – and these literacies are viewed as sets of practice, the focus shifts towards ways in which students learn to participate and make meaning within an academic context. These ways of making meaning are valued by the cultures, traditions or academic disciplines with which they are associated. The more specialised the academic disciplines become, the more specialised the “ways with words” (see Heath, 1986). In this way, academic disciplines are recognised not only by specialised vocabularies, concepts and knowledges, but also by accepted and valued patterns of meaning-making activity, including genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations and narrative devices (Rex & McEachen, 1999). As students participate in these disciplines, they learn specific ways of making meaning as well as contesting meaning. Thus, there are no singular, unified practices that can be said to count always and only as academic literacy (Baker & Luke, 1991; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; McHoul, 1991).

Therefore, in describing academic literacy, it is necessary to take account of the ways it is negotiated and reconstituted in historical, cultural and political contexts. In the process of reconstitution, it becomes important to understand who decides what counts, what gets included and excluded, what is privileged and what is marginalised (Heap, 1985). For students to perform successfully in their university studies, they are required to enter into the academic discourses of particular disciplines (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). As Rex and McEachen (1999) argue, this means that students have to know “how to engage with and construct texts strategically and procedurally within particular interactional contexts”, because literacies represent socially developed and culturally embedded ways of using text to serve particular cultural or social purposes (p. 71). This view has significant implications for the learning of literacy by diverse populations of students. However, although such a view helps us to think about academic literacies differently and about how students engage with them, it does not critique or challenge the assumptions that are made about what *counts* as academic literacy.

Traditionally, competence with academic language and particular discipline-based reading and writing practices was equated with being intelligent and erudite. As Gee (2004) explains, academic literacy was central to becoming a “schooled” and “intelligent” person and therefore operated as “a significant gate to economic success and socio-political power” in society (p. 91). Indeed, traditional approaches to academic literacy have tended to focus on ways of helping students “adapt their practices to those of the university” (Lea & Street, 1998). In today’s world, however, where more students attend universities and most university degree programmes have a specific vocational focus, it would seem essential that we re-assess the literacy practices that students might need in their working lives, in their public lives as citizens and in their personal lives (The New London Group, 1996). We then need to consider whether university courses are providing opportunities for students to engage with the literacy practices that are relevant to their current and future societal needs.

Educators need to be cognisant of the way that students’ life pathways will be diverse and often uncertain as they become more active in their vocational, civic and domestic lives (see Department of Education, Queensland, 2000, p. 110). At the same time, however, it is also important to remember that universities are the training grounds for higher education and academia and that they must therefore provide opportunities for students to engage with the particular academic literacy practices of specific disciplines. In effect, universities have multiple responsibilities in the area of literacy learning. Academic literacy, then, has not become irrelevant but must be seen as one of a range of literacy practices that students should develop. In Gee’s (2004) words, academic literacy is “at best a *necessary, but not sufficient* condition for success in society” (p. 94).

Part of our responsibility as tertiary educators, then, would seem to be an audit of the literacy requirements that our students will need for their future lives. Nevertheless, we also have to recognise that the world is in a constant state of flux and that:

The very practices, demands and relationships of citizenship, legal rights and responsibilities, and civic participation are shifting in relation to globalisation, debates over national governance and Reconciliation. Cultures and cultural heritages are changing and blending under the influences of new technologies and economies, the knowledge and cultural claims of new and old communities, and those of a highly

mobile, increasingly polyglot and cosmopolitan population (Department of Education, Queensland, 2000, p. 111).

As a result, an audit of literacy practices should consider the demands of tertiary education, induction into “particular communities of knowledge and practice, real and virtual” in “specific places and global communities” (Department of Education Queensland, 2000, p.111), as well as the possibilities for new and hybrid texts and new and even presently un-thought-of literacy practices within a changing world. Whilst a range of relatively new text-types, including webpages, blogs and wikis, are beginning to permeate instructional and assessment practices in tertiary institutions, literacy practices surrounding these texts are generally seen as separate from what is regarded and practised as academic literacy. In our opinion, it is important to think of “academic literacy” as plural, as having to be constantly negotiated, and as providing students with opportunities to develop flexible literacy repertoires that can morph and adapt to changing conditions.

RE-ENVISAGING ACADEMIC LITERACY

In the preceding discussion we have considered the ways in which the teaching of academic literacy is approached in universities. We have argued that, in traditional approaches, academic literacy is separated from disciplines and constructed in terms of skills. This separation is often a “physical” or spatial one, with learning advisers located in centrally organised support services and students offered a skills-based model of delivery. By contrast, taking a situated view of literacy foregrounds disciplinary specific practices and the teaching-learning relationship. In this way, deficit views of student diversity are replaced by developing ways for students to participate successfully with the specific literate practices of a community. Such an approach integrates the space of the discipline with the space of literacy. This is evident in apprenticeship models (for example, Greenleaf, Schoenback, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Hirst et al., 2004; Rex & McEachen, 1999) and embedded approaches (for example, Alvermann, 2001; Green et al., 2005). Although these integrated approaches are considered more successful than study skills approaches (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004; Hirst et al., 2004), we argue that both approaches operate with taken-for-granted assumptions about academic literacy.

By failing to critique academic literacy, we believe that we are selling students short. Although the learnings that students construct in situated programmes are essential, they are, as argued earlier, “at best a *necessary, but not sufficient* condition for success in society” (Gee, 2004, p.94). Drawing on Gee’s (2003, 2004, 2005) critique of traditional schooling, we argue that a deliberate shift towards a consideration of academic literacies within a theory of learning offers a way of thinking about literacy learning within a broader field and takes the social, cognitive and linguistic dimensions of literacy into account (see Henderson, 2002).

Gee’s (2004) approach to academic language and learning developed from his observations that video and computer games are places where “young people of all races and classes readily learn specialist varieties of language and ways of thinking without alienation” (p. 4). In Gee’s opinion, games have much to teach educators about learning. He suggests that games – which are long, complex, difficult and

sometimes take in excess of 50 hours to play – provide insights into “how to make the learning of specialist varieties of language and thinking...more equitable, less alienating, and more motivating” (p. 4; see also p. 57). From his investigations of computer games, Gee extracts a list of learning principles which, he believes, encourage a form of learning that makes conventional educational practices “look uninspired and out of touch with the realities of how human learning works at a deep level” (p. 75). In turning to new ways of learning within the “high-tech and global economy” (p. 4), Gee highlights the necessity for educators to think beyond traditional approaches.

By focusing on learning as a social and cultural process, Gee (2004) argues that “people learn best when their learning is part of a highly motivated engagement with social practices which they value” and that “space” is a constructive concept for understanding how learning occurs (p. 77). Whilst he acknowledges that the notion of communities of practice has been a useful one in thinking about learning, he identifies its emphasis on belongingness and membership as not-so-useful. In Gee’s opinion, the apprenticeship model of learning tends to fix and label the community of practice – the group of experts who have mastered the practice – and the issue becomes one of deciding who is *in* and who is *out*. He suggests that, rather than starting with groups of people, we should start with space, either real or virtual, and consider how different sorts of people use that space.

Gee (2004) conceptualises space as having content – whatever the space is about, in particular the design or organisation of the space – and interaction – the ways that people organise social interactions as well as their thoughts, beliefs, values and actions. He calls things that provide content and offer meaning (for example, multimodal signs) “generators”, whilst access to any space is via “portals” – “places where people get access to interact with the content generators generate” (p. 82). Through this conceptualisation, Gee forces us to consider content and social interaction as inseparable elements of learning. By using space as a lens, he encourages us to engage with the dialogical nature of learning and the mutually informing relationship between the *what* and the *how*, the content and the social interaction.

Gee (2004) argues that every space has a content organisation – “that is, how its content is designed or organized” – and an interactional organisation – “namely, how people organize their thoughts, beliefs, values, actions, and social interactions in regard to those signs and their relationships” (p. 81). He explains that:

the actions of people helping to form the interactional organization of the space as a set of social practices and typical identities can rebound on the actions of those helping to design the content of the space, since the designers must react to the pleasures and displeasures of the people interacting with the content they have designed. At the same time, the actions of those designing the content rebound on the actions of those helping to organize the interaction organization as a set of social practices and identities, since that content shapes and transforms (though by no means fully determines) those practices (p. 81).

This means that the content organisation and the interactional organisation work in a mutually-informing relationship, reflexively shaping each other. In Gee’s description of computer games, the designers of the games (the content organisers) help to “shape

and transform” the actions of the players, whilst the players (those interacting with the content) help to design the content of games through their continued use, or abandonment, of the game (Gee, 2004, p. 81). As players of computer games such as *World of Warcraft* can attest, regular updates or “patches” provide evidence of changes to the game in response to player feedback. Gee points out that an understanding of the relationship between content and interaction in a particular “space” can offer insights to educators about the principles of effective learning.

Drawing on his research of computer games, Gee (2004) uses the notion of “affinity spaces”, a particular type of space, to explain how effective learning can take place. He argues that affinity spaces are quite common in today’s world and that many students have extensive experience of such spaces through their engagement with computer games. However, Gee is of the belief that “what people have an affinity with (or for) in an affinity space is not first and foremost the other people using the space, but the endeavour or interest around which the game is organized” (p. 84), hence the move towards an examination of affinity spaces rather than communities of practice. In light of this view and the successful learning achieved by many players of computer games, Gee has identified 11 features that he regards as characteristic of affinity spaces:

1. evidence of a common endeavour (for example, interests, goals or practices)
2. novices and experts share common space
3. some portals are strong generators
4. the content of the space is transformed by the actions and interactions of participants
5. intensive (specialised) and extensive (less specialised) knowledge are encouraged
6. individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged
7. dispersed knowledge (and therefore networking to other spaces) is encouraged
8. tacit knowledge built up during practice is encouraged
9. multiple forms of and routes to participation
10. different ways of demonstrating learning, and
11. leadership is porous and leaders are resources

(from Gee, 2004, pp. 85-87).

RE-EXAMINING A “SUCCESSFUL” SHORT-COURSE

In light of our discussions about traditional and situated views of academic literacy, this paper sets out to re-examine a successful short-course in academic literacy that was conducted for a cohort of “disadvantaged” students enrolled in the first year of an education degree (see Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode, & Kocatepe, 2004). The short-course was an additional and voluntary course for students who identified themselves as “at-risk” within the university context and it carried no credit towards the students’ degree study. Its success was based on feedback from the students and an analysis of the students’ results in the accompanying core course and a subsequent core course (Hirst et al., 2004).

As part of a team of five, we (the authors of this paper) designed, planned and taught the short-course, which we called *Apprenticeship in academic literacy*, at a university in regional Australia. The short-course aimed to contribute to the equity objectives of the university by increasing the success and retention rates of students from low

socio-economic, rural, isolated and indigenous backgrounds in their early encounters with the academic literacy requirements of their education degree programme.

We took a situated approach to the short-course by locating it within a core first-year education course called *Language and literacies in education*. Using the set readings and essay assignment as focus points of the short-course, we worked with students on developing reading and writing strategies that would assist them with the learning and assessment requirements of the course. Our short-course was constructed of five two-hour workshops comprising no more than ten students and a mentor tutor who was a third-year, education student. Students were involved in a range of oral and print-based tasks, which were undertaken singly, in pairs, in small groups or as a class. Some tasks relied on students using their own knowledge and pre-existing skills. We wanted students to value the identities that they brought to their studies, to be aware of their own already-existing study strategies, to build on these resources, and to make them available to other members of the group. In other activities, we modelled the exercise first, making our approach explicit, thus sharing the resources that we brought to the workshops.

In taking a broad view of literacy as social practice, we used Luke and Freebody's four resources model (Freebody, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000) as a tool to design and organise the literacy course and to inform our pedagogical practices for developing students' tertiary literacy abilities. The model identifies four aspects of literacy practice – code-breaking, text participation or meaning making, text use and text analysis – and offers a way of making sense of these inter-related resources that being literate requires. Additionally, we taught the students about the model and how to use it to frame their understandings about literacy and literacy learning in general.

Each workshop was planned using the framework of the four resources model, with the workshop activities focussing on the first five weeks' readings of the core education course. Our plan was to apprentice the students to the specific literacy practices that were privileged within the core course. For example, students were expected to summarise the readings and provide responses in their regular tutorials, so these practices provided the focus of our workshops. Table 1 shows the activities used in one of the workshops.

PROBLEMATISING THE “SUCCESSFUL” SHORT-COURSE

In view of our discussion and critique of academic literacy, we are now beginning to question the effects of the short-course that we conducted. Did the short-course merely inculcate students into the situated practices of a first-year education course? Or did the students' developing literacy practices help them to prepare for the changing demands of an increasingly globalised and diverse world?

Considering the short-course in relation to Lea and Street's (1998) conceptualisations of academic literacies, it would appear that the short-course fitted the apprenticeship model. Indeed, we named the short-course an *Apprenticeship in academic literacy* and explained that we “constructed students as being apprenticed to a set of specific social practices” which would “enable them to participate effectively in tertiary

communities” (Hirst et al., 2004, p. 69). Even though we located the short-course within a socio-cultural frame and argued that academic literacy was “one of the many or multiple literacies that exist” (p. 68), we neither critiqued nor problematised the notion of academic literacies. Our approach was one that kept the focus on the students themselves and, as Lea and Street (1998) highlighted, this type of approach is unlikely to provide anything more than limited explanations of students’ learning of academic literacies. We treated the conventions of the academic literacy as incontestable and did not explore other options. For example, we did not consider that the alternative literacy practices and discourses that students bring to the university might eventually have some effect on academic conventions (Ivanic, 1998). We did not encourage the students to critically examine and challenge the conventions, nor did we do that ourselves.

Table 1. A workshop outline from the Apprenticeship in Academic Literacy course

Focus Strategies	Tasks	Resources
Predicting/ Anticipating – text participant	1. Reflect on previous week’s strategies. 2. Look at title of readings. Predict content of each. What information about the literacy roles can you bring to this reading?	Ludwig (2000) Luke & Freebody (1999)
Recognise purpose – text user Skim/scan	3. Recall information about literacy roles from lectures or tutorials. Compare notes. 4. Recognise authors’ purposes in writing these articles (Look for keywords in introduction). 5. Identify key words – skim/scan readings 6. Consider your purpose for reading: Define the literacy roles (your purpose is different from the authors’ purpose). 7. Ask students which literacy role they are utilising.	
Metacognitive strategies Code breaker	8. Look for definitions of key words – identify signals for example, headings, linguistic signals, bullet points. 9. Identify words in Luke & Freebody that make the article difficult to read. 10. Note: Density and complexity of an introduction often cause students to give up reading – Why is text dense? Authors are often establishing their credentials and indicating their position in this area.	
Text analyst	11. Compare differences in use of language in the readings.	

Similarly, the model of situated learning that we adopted assumes that the practices of the community are beyond critique. This model understands learning as a process of participation in communities of practice, where novices gradually change the ways they engage as they move from peripheral participation to more expert and complex practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although we acknowledge that the students were able to participate successfully in the core education course and the courses that followed, we feel uncomfortable about our lack of critique of academic literacies per se. We are troubled by the passivity of the students as learners, in terms of their acceptance of the “rules” of academic literacy, and the way that we simply helped to

inculcate them into “the current power/knowledge regime of the community” (Hildebrand, 1999).

EXAMINING THE SHORT-COURSE WITH A FOCUS ON SPACE

In view of Gee’s (2004) perspective on academic literacy and literacy learning, we use the five questions that he offers to consider how the features of the short-course might have operated as an affinity space. These questions are:

- What is the generator (the source of the content)?
- What is the content and interactional organisation of the space?
- How do content and interactional organisation reflexively shape each other?
- What are the portals that give students access to interactions with the signs?
- Is the generator also a portal and is the portal also a generator?

(from Gee, 2004, pp. 82-83)

Gee’s questions provide us with a guide for re-examining the short-course that we conducted and allow us to consider how (and whether) our short-course links with his description of the features of affinity spaces.

Generators

In the first year education course in which our students were enrolled, the content was provided by a series of “generators”, including a book of readings, a study guide, the spoken text of lectures and PowerPoint slides. This content was also used during the short-course that we conducted and was “fixed” prior to the short-course’s implementation through extensive collaborative planning by the team using the materials from the first year course. The four resources model (Freebody, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000) was also a generator. It underpinned the design of the short-course and its pedagogy, whilst also providing a frame that students used for engaging with the literacy practices of their education course. In drawing on the four resources model, we were explicit in our use of the model and asked students to be explicit in identifying and deploying each of the four literacy practices of the model, namely code breaker, text participant (meaning maker), text user and text analyst. Thus, the model became a portal for accessing and understanding how texts work. The model was used as a tool to design and organise the literacy course and to inform our pedagogical practices for developing students’ tertiary literacy practices. This enabled students to use the model as content, as well as a way of framing their understandings about literacy in general.

Content and interactional organization

The common endeavour that characterised the short-course was a common interest and desire for all participants to be successful in writing an academic essay as an assessment item in the core education course. The students attended the short-course on a voluntary basis and there was neither an assessment item nor an offering of academic credit associated with the short-course. Although the team acknowledged and encouraged students to draw on their tacit and explicit background knowledge, this knowledge was not used as a generator. The students were learning how to master

the content that the teaching team had decided was essential. There was an underlying assumption that *we* knew what content was important for the students and we did not contest that assumption. Nevertheless, the students drew on the knowledge they were developing in the first year course, *Language and literacies in education*, and the other core education courses they were enrolled in.

The short-course was designed to apprentice the students into appropriating the literacy practices which we regarded as indispensable for success in the language and literacies course. This meant that the content was organised in ways that made the available designs replicable by the students, thus inculcating them into the literacy practices of the academy. Additionally, the students were encouraged to use their background knowledge as a springboard to learn new ways of presenting themselves as literate. We assumed that these ways would give them access to success in their studies at university. In this way, we privileged the literacy practices of the academy and essentialised what it meant to be academically literate. However, only the students' background knowledge that suited our purposes was used as building blocks, thus excluding other ways of knowing and doing. We did not consider how different practices might have been used to innovate or re-design the practices of the academy. As a result, the content of this particular learning space was not transformed by the actions and interactions of the participants.

In terms of the interactional organisation of the short-course, the student participants were organised into groups. As explained earlier, each group comprised up to 10 students, a tutor and a support tutor (third year education student), and students worked individually, in pairs, in small groups, and as a whole group as they interacted with and used the four resources model. Although we provided opportunities for all students to interact within the learning space in a range of ways, *we* decided in advance which interactional organisation would be used and when it would be used. We thus limited the potential for other forms of, or routes to, participation.

Within the short-course, it was assumed that learning was the job of the students and teaching was the job of the experts. Nevertheless, we did offer participants the opportunity to take up different roles within their group. As teachers, we saw ourselves primarily as designers and enablers, rather than taking up authoritarian leadership roles. We did not insist on compulsory attendance and the size of the groups allowed us to conduct the short-course in an informal interactional format. In this context, students began to see themselves and us as part of various communities of learners. These communities continued to evolve and address new goals in other education courses. In particular, students reconstituted the space of this short-course to develop other learning spaces. For example, some of the students continued to meet as study groups and to maintain contact with their third-year mentors and academic staff as they worked together on other issues relating to their study (see Hirst et al., 2004, p.74). In this way, the students' knowledge about learning that developed in this short-course was dispersed as they continued to network in other learning spaces.

The way the content was organised and designed shaped the way that students and tutors engaged in, and used, various literacy practices. Our goal was for students to develop a repertoire of literacy practices that would facilitate their successful engagement with university study. These practices had the potential to shape and reshape the short-course content, because the short-course encouraged students to

interact as code-breakers, meaning-makers, text users and significantly as text analysts (Freebody, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000). However, on reflection, we recognise that this potential was not realised. We were so intent on students appropriating the privileged practices, that we became blind to other ways of demonstrating learning and to the possibility of critiquing and reshaping the “accepted” academic literacy practices of the academy. This highlights a number of dilemmas for us as literacy educators: Do learners need to know “the rules” before they can break them? What is the balance in the dialectic of restraint and innovation in literacy practices? To what extent should we have encouraged creative and innovative responses in our short-course?

Portals

In terms of Gee’s (2004) discussion of affinity spaces, the short-course did provide a successful portal – access to and interaction in the learning space – but it was not a strong generator of content. However, the short-course was a portal for only *some* of the students who were enrolled in the first year education course, as those with more expertise were not expected to join the short-course. Even though students self-selected to participate, it was explained that the short-course was aimed at “disadvantaged” students as determined by the requirements of the university equity funding scheme.

The purpose of the short-course was to give students access to the specialised signs associated with a particular academic discipline. Furthermore, the short-course also focused on assisting students to learn some less specialised knowledge that would enable them to transfer strategies, such as note-making practices, identifying topic sentences and making margin notes, to other disciplinary areas. In asking students to explicitly discuss and identify the tacit knowledge they used to accomplish these academic literacy tasks, this knowledge became available to other short-course participants. As a result, the content provided a portal for other students in their group, thus encouraging the development of both individual and distributed knowledge.

In addressing the questions outlined by Gee (2004) and considering the features of affinity spaces, we ask whether our short-course operated as an affinity space. In our re-examination of the short-course, we suggest that it fulfilled some of the features of affinity spaces. There was clearly evidence of a common endeavour with novices and experts sharing a common space. The tutors, positioned as the experts, tended to remain the leaders of the groups as well as being resources. Tacit knowledge was built up during practice. Intensive specialised knowledge and extensive less specialised knowledge were encouraged, as were individual and distributed knowledges. The reconstitution of other learning spaces was realised through networking and the maintenance of relationships creating a number of portals to content in other academic areas of the students’ education programme. However, the content of the space, which had been pre-specified, was barely transformed by the actions and interactions of participants.

Indeed, in questioning whether some portals are also operating as generators, Gee (2004) asks whether students “change the sign system (content) with which the class is interacting in any serious way?” (p. 83). In the case of the short-course that we conducted, we would not claim that any of the portals were operating as generators,

and that we in fact reinscribed a singular view of academic literacy. Nevertheless, we would claim that some of the generators were operating as portals. In particular, the four resources model was both the content of the first-year education course and the short-course and it also provided the tools for students to interact with, and in, literacy practices as code breakers, text participants, texts users and text analysts. However, these means of interacting constrained other forms and ways of participating and demonstrating learning.

CONCLUSION

Our examination of a short-course for first-year, tertiary students addressed the framing questions posed by Gee (2004) in his discussion of the features of affinity spaces. We found that our short-course fell short. Although it had some of the features that Gee advocates for enhancing motivation and engagement in learning, other features were clearly absent. The generator or content was not negotiable within the short-course we offered. Despite our best intentions and the implementation of a situated model, we still tended towards a more traditional approach to academic literacy, focusing on ways of helping students adapt their practices to those of the university. In this way we inculcated students into the situated practices of their first year degree course, without giving them the opportunity to contest those practices, construct new and hybrid texts or consider un-thought-of literacy practices.

This suggests that we may not have prepared them to negotiate the changing literacy demands of an increasingly globalised and diverse world or to develop more flexible literacy repertoires that they could adapt to changing conditions. Whilst the short-course was rated by the students as being necessary for them to be successful in the context of their education degree, we recognise that it was probably not sufficient in preparing them for success in the broader society. This prompts us to further rethink the teaching of academic literacies, to conceive academic literacy as something that has to be constantly negotiated, and to advocate for pedagogies that do not just reinforce and reproduce existing discourse practices, but rather develop and enable reflection, critique and active challenge to current power/knowledge systems.

NOTES

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